



President Obama and President Xi Jinping walk on grounds of Annenberg Retreat at Sunnylands, in Rancho Mirage, California, before their bilateral meeting, June 8, 2013
(White House/Pete Souza)

China's Military Reforms

An Optimistic Take

By Michael S. Chase and Jeffrey Engstrom

China is implementing a sweeping reorganization of its military that has the potential to be the most important in the post-1949 history of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).¹ Xi Jinping, who serves as China's president, general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), seeks to transform the PLA into a

fully modernized and "informatized" fighting force capable of carrying out joint combat operations, conducting military operations other than war (MOOTW), and providing a powerful strategic deterrent to prevent challenges to China's interests and constrain the decisions of potential adversaries. Scheduled for completion by 2020, the reforms aim to place the services on a

more even footing in the traditionally army-dominated PLA and to enable the military to more effectively harness space, cyberspace, and electronic warfare capabilities. Simultaneously, Xi is looking to rein in PLA corruption and assert his control over the military.

Brief Overview of the Reforms

China unveiled the long-anticipated organizational reforms in a series of major announcements beginning on December 31, 2015, when it subordinated the ground force to an army

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service headquarters, raised the stature and role of the strategic missile force, and established a Strategic Support Force (SSF) to integrate space, cyber, and electronic warfare capabilities. On January 11, 2016, Xi announced “a dramatic breakthrough . . . in the reform of the military leadership and command system” that discarded the PLA’s four traditional general departments in favor of 15 new CMC functional departments.² Next, the reorganization eliminated China’s seven military regions (MRs) and converted them into five theater commands. This part of the restructuring is intended to enhance the PLA’s readiness and strengthen its deterrence and warfighting capabilities. In addition, the CMC released a “guideline on deepening national defense and military reform,” which states that under the new system, the CMC is in charge of overall administration of the PLA, People’s Armed Police, militia, and reserves; the new joint war zone commands focus on combat preparedness, and the services are in charge of development (presumably of personnel and capabilities).

Likely Benefits of the Reforms

The reforms are likely to offer benefits in several areas, including achieving enhanced jointness, optimizing organizational structures for combat, and ensuring information dominance.

Achieving Enhanced Jointness. One important aspect of the reforms is that the ground force is becoming a real service. Historically, the PLA’s ground service component lacked a headquarters and instead dominated the entire military by controlling all four of the PLA’s general departments, which doubled as its de facto headquarters. Under the new system, however, the army will now possess its own headquarters—referred to as the PLA Army Leading Organ—and will be on par with the PLA’s naval, air, and newly formed strategic missile service.

The main goals in this respect appear to be to reduce army domination and improve the PLA’s jointness. To this end, giving the ground force its own headquarters appears to be an important step

in the direction of positioning the PLA away from the dominance of army-centric thinking and leadership. It also emphasizes the contributions of other services, and, along with the reduction of 300,000 troops Xi announced in September 2015, it likely cuts fat and frees resources to build air force, rocket force, and navy capabilities.³ Another benefit of the ground force focusing more heavily on its own requirements rather than those of the entire PLA could be accelerating efforts to transform it into a leaner force more capable of carrying out joint combat operations and MOOTW.

Optimizing Organizational Structures for Combat. The second major benefit of the reforms derives from the elimination of MRs and their replacement with theater commands. The purpose of reorganizing the military regions into a smaller number of theater commands is to improve the PLA’s ability to prepare for and execute modern, high-intensity joint military operations. For many years, PLA officers have perceived the old MR-based command structure as outdated and not well suited to winning the kinds of conflicts they think the PLA may need to be prepared for in the future.

Theater commands now directly focus on the specific strategic directions determined by potential external threats. Instead of two MRs dealing with a hypothetical India conflict, there is now one. Instead of three MRs bordering Russia, there are now only two, and one shares only an approximately 30-mile border. In this way, the external threat environment arguably has shaped the development of the theaters in a profound way that never appeared to be a rationale for any of the previous and varied configurations of MRs since the founding of the PRC. Seams, however, still exist. The Sino-Vietnamese border region appears unchanged by this restructuring, with two theater commands replacing two military regions.

Transition from peacetime to wartime command will be easier. Under the former system, the MR commander was not necessarily the wartime theater commander. This individual would likely be appointed by the CMC and sanctioned

to set up a theater that might span multiple MRs.⁴ Under the new system, the theater command for wartime is already stood up. The theater command is the “top joint operational commanding institution,” and therefore the theater commander is also the joint forces commander.⁵ The theater commander and his staff presumably are already keenly attuned to the particular threats in their command and, other than potential relocation to a wartime command post, are immediately ready to prosecute a conflict with forces currently existing within the theater command and those that may have been sent from other theater commands.

In addition, the theater command structure allows the PLA to truly implement the active defense strategy as a preemptive posture. The former system of enacting wartime theaters placed a premium on China either starting a conflict itself or anticipating conflict well before it occurred. Conflict or aggression that was either unforeseen or occurred with little lead time immediately placed China into a reactive and defensive posture. Early iterations of the People’s War strategy recognized China’s own limitations in its ability to fight technologically superior adversaries under these circumstances, tacitly accepting that potential invaders would necessarily encroach upon China’s territorial sovereignty. Though substantial military modernization efforts by the PLA over the last few decades had already rendered Maoist doctrine on this topic moot, the theater command structure provides the required organizational framework to enact an active defense posture.

Ensuring Information Dominance. A third major benefit could be realized if the creation of the Strategic Support Force—which is responsible for cyber, space, electronic warfare, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance—offers improved flexibility and responsiveness that enhance the PLA’s ability to fight multi-domain conflicts. This recognizes the need for such forces, places them within a clear command structure, and likely provides additional resources and intra-service stature (from a general staff department to a force).



Anti-corruption campaign began after conclusion of 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in Beijing, November 2012 (Dong Fang)

Indeed, this may be the least surprising change, as the emphasis on information warfare has captured the attention of the PLA since at least the mid-1990s. The current conception of “winning informationized local wars” recognizes the centrality of information and the information domain as a battlefield in modern warfare. The creation of such forces is driven by the reality that national-level assets must perform many information functions in warfare. Furthermore, it would be unrealistic and unnecessary to recreate many of these functions and capabilities under each theater command. Lastly, many of the SSF’s capabilities in the cyber and space domains, if used, could be extremely escalatory. For all of these factors, the SSF appears to be directly (and appropriately) subordinate to the CMC rather than a theater command or service. However, it appears likely that units within the theaters will be under operational control of the theater commander.⁶

Success Likely Despite Expected Opposition

Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is part of an effort aimed at strengthening party (and his own) control over the PLA. When Xi assumed power in November 2012, he vowed to fight both “tigers” and “flies”—a reference to taking on corrupt leaders at the highest levels as well as lower level bureaucrats engaged in corrupt practices throughout the Chinese system, and the PLA would be no exception. The first shot over the bow came against the tigers. In 2014, Xi arrested a former CMC vice chairman, Xu Caihou, for participating in a “cash for ranks” scheme. After expelling Xu from the party, Xi followed up in 2015 with the arrest and purge of another former CMC vice chairman, Guo Boxiong, on similar charges. The arrests were unprecedented in that Xu and Guo were the two highest-ranking officers in China’s military when they

served as CMC vice chairmen, and their arrests marked the first time the PLA’s highest-level retired officers faced corruption charges. As of early March 2016, Xi’s anti-corruption campaign had reportedly resulted in the arrest of at least 60 military officers, although the actual numbers could be higher.

Another reflection of Xi’s determination to strengthen his control came when he drew a direct line between the era of Mao Zedong and the present at a major meeting in November 2014. In commemoration of the 85th anniversary of the “Gutian Congress,” at which Mao first affirmed the “party’s absolute control over the military” in 1929, Xi convened 420 of his most senior officers to meet in the small town of Gutian in southeastern Fujian Province.⁷ This was believed to be the first time a PRC leader reconvened military leadership at Gutian since Mao’s famous meeting there—symbolism that was certainly not lost on the top brass.

Prior reading material reportedly reaffirmed the unassailable and preeminent position the party has over the military. This set the stage for Xi to implicitly convey to all in attendance that they too could become victims of his anti-corruption campaign, just as General Xu had a few months earlier, if they refused to toe the line. Indeed, the anti-corruption campaign is probably the most important source of Xi's power over the PLA.

Unanswered Questions

While the reorganization appears to offer a number of important benefits to the PLA, several important questions remain unanswered. These include:

- What impact will the anti-corruption campaign have on military effectiveness? Specifically, is it weeding out the bad apples, or does it have a chilling effect on potentially dynamic senior officers that the PLA will need if it is to be successful in fighting and winning wars?
- Will ground force personnel continue to dominate most of the top positions in the PLA even under the reforms, or will this change over the next several years as a result of future retirements and promotions under the reforms? For example, will a PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, or PLA Rocket Force officer serve in a position such as commander of one of the new theater commands or director of the new Joint Staff Department under the CMC?
- Does the focus on the reorganization and changes such as reshuffling of former MR commanders to new theaters cast doubt on the PLA's ability to prosecute conflict at its borders, at least in the short run?
- Can the PLA ever move from a system of personal power bases/loyalty structures to one of a highly functional bureaucracy in which such dynamics matter very little or not at all?

Conclusion

Xi Jinping has ordered the PLA to embark on a sweeping reorganization

aimed at transforming it into a leaner and more modern military that is more capable of carrying out joint operations. There are clear indications that Beijing expects some internal opposition to the reorganization, but Xi Jinping's unprecedented anti-corruption campaign probably gives him the leverage he needs to overcome entrenched opposition. The reorganization will have a major impact on the PLA's ability to prepare for and execute its main functions of strategic deterrence, combat operations, and MOOTW.

Importantly, despite some speculation to the contrary, Xi's assertion of control over the military in the form of the anti-corruption campaign and organizational reforms is more likely to enhance than it is to impede the PLA's ongoing modernization efforts. Part of Xi's "China Dream" is to produce a strong military capable of deterring or, if necessary, taking on powerful potential adversaries, including even the United States.

Xi not only wants a PLA that demonstrates utmost loyalty to the party, but he also wants a far more competent and operationally capable PLA by 2020, one that is commensurate with China's status as a major world power and capable of protecting China's regional and global interests. If his aspirations are realized, Xi's reformed PLA will soon be capable of posing an even more potent challenge to China's neighbors and to U.S. objectives and strategy in the region. JFQ

Notes

¹ See, for example, Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, *China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms*, Strategic Forum 294 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, April 2016), available at <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-294.pdf>; and Kenneth W. Allen, Dennis J. Blasko, and John F. Corbett, Jr., *The PLA's New Organizational Structure: What is Known, Unknown and Speculation (Part 1)*, China Brief 16, no. 3 (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, February 4, 2016).

² Prior to the reorganization, these were the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armaments Department. These new functional departments under the Central

Military Committee (CMC) include the General Office, Joint Staff Department, Political Work Department, Logistic Support Department, Equipment Development Department, Training and Administration Department, National Defense Mobilization Department, Discipline Inspection Commission, Politics and Law Commission, Science and Technology Commission, Office for Strategic Planning, Office for Reform and Organizational Structure, Office for International Military Cooperation, Audit Office, and Agency for Offices Administration.

³ Evidence of this is having an immediate trickledown effect on the enrollment at the PLA's military schools; one newspaper article reports that schools focusing on ground force competencies such as infantry and artillery will see a reduction in admission of 24 percent whereas aviation, missile, and naval schools will increase admissions by 14 percent. See "PLA Restructuring Changes Focus at Military Schools," *China Daily*, April 28, 2016.

⁴ This individual could be a commander of one of the military regions adjacent to conflict as it was with Xu Shiyou and Li Desheng for the Southern and Northern Theaters, respectively, during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, or the CMC could appoint a senior general officer from another command entirely, as it did with Peng Dehuai during the Korean War.

⁵ "Spokesperson: PLA's Theater Command Adjustment and Establishment Accomplished," *China Military Online*, February 2, 2016.

⁶ Saunders and Wuthnow, 3.

⁷ James C. Mulvenon, "Hotel Gutian: We Haven't Had That Spirit Here Since 1929," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46 (Winter 2015).